

Child Assessment

The intake caseworker must observe the child to determine the presence and extent of injury or illness. Both physical and behavioral indicators should be assessed, including:

- The child should be seen first to enable the worker to gather first-hand information regarding indicators of maltreatment and to begin assessing the risk of future harm. If the child is of preschool age or older, the worker should directly and privately interview the child. While the primary purpose of seeing children first is to determine risk, this also helps lessen the likelihood that they will change or recant their story in response to parental threats.
- The child should be interviewed in a neutral setting, such as at school or at the hospital. If the initial interview with the child must occur in the home, the child should be interviewed separately from other family members. In situations of physical or sexual abuse, the interview with the child should never be conducted in the presence of or within hearing distance of the alleged perpetrator.
- The worker should use specialized child-oriented interviewing techniques that can relax the child. The child should be helped to describe the situation and sequence of events with the least amount of trauma and embarrassment. If at all possible, the child should not have to repeat the story more than once during the initial assessment process. This is facilitated by joint interviews when law enforcement and child welfare workers are both involved in the investigation.
- The worker must be prepared to protect the child from retaliation or punishment by the parent for having disclosed the maltreatment.
- When the alleged perpetrator is a stranger, or someone not emotionally involved with the family, the initial contact may be made with the parents. This can help promote a collaborative relationship with the parents and mobilize them to provide necessary protection for the child.
- Methods of interviewing and family assessment in situations of sexual abuse are specialized and should be conducted by an experienced worker with specialized training in investigating sexual abuse.

Source: *Field Guide to Child Welfare* by Judith S. Rycus and Ronald C. Hughes